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# Not a Spy, a Hostage

The formal charge of espionage against Nicholas Daniloff, an innocent American correspondent in Moscow, creates a grievous threat to Soviet-American relations. Pravda's claim notwithstanding, the rage that Americans feel is not being whipped up by opponents of arms control and other negotiations. It is an expression of widespread disgust that the Soviet Government would seize a legitimate journalist as hostage to force the release of one of its paid spies in the United States.

Everything turns, of course, on Mr. Daniloff's innocence. To us it is obvious. President Reagan would not lightly give his word, in what he hoped would be a private letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, that the correspondent was not an agent. As important, Mr. Daniloff has impressed all who know his work with his dedication to our craft and protecting it against double-dealing. No real spy in the clutches of the K.G.B. would have begun his first communication home with a request that he not be compromised in a trade for a Soviet spy — though Mr. Daniloff's resolve on this point seems to have been weakened by threats of a trial and long incarceration.

Admittedly, guilt in the Soviet Union is a flexible concept. A thorough student of Soviet society can hardly conduct an interview without risking a charge of impermissible inquiry. To show interest in the hidden war in Afghanistan, or public attitudes toward it, can risk charges of pursuing "military" intelligence. To photograph a railroad station or

power plant can risk accusation of serving potential saboteurs. And as seems to have happened in this case, the K.G.B. can compel any Soviet citizen to hand the foreigner secret documents or to misrepresent a show of curiosity.

Timing alone points to a frame-up. Mr. Daniloff was seized a week after Gennadi Zakharov, a Soviet U.N. official, was arrested for espionage in New York — and, like him, lacks diplomatic immunity. The K.G.B. needed someone it could hold as long as Mr. Zakharov is held, and to do unto him whatever is done to their man. That is hostage-taking, and it puts all nongovernmental contacts at risk. It is most offensive precisely to those Americans who favor improved contacts.

That Mr. Gorbachev would let loyalty to his secret police jeopardize the course of relations invites broader speculation about whether he really wants to visit the United States this year. But if he thinks the Reagan Administration is seizing a pretext to disinvite him, he is badly misinformed. Americans already angered by outlaw hijackers and hostage-takers will not tolerate a responsible government's resort to those same tactics.

How to retaliate and win Mr. Daniloff's release is no easy problem. But the pressure to retaliate, even at significant cost to diplomacy, must now grow. For the sake of large stakes, this is one prisoner Mr. Gorbachev should want to be rid of fast.